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ABSTRACT

Three aspects of institutional assessment are considered in this paper: the historical development of the postsecondary assessment movement; New Jersey's mandated College Outcomes Evaluation Program (COEP); and the response of the state's community colleges to the program. The first section traces the emergence of concern among national policy makers about the quality of undergraduate education and examines state-level responses to these concerns. The next sections review the positions put forth by those who oppose and support assessment. Educators' concerns about threats to academic freedom, the expenditure of state funds for questionable returns, and the misuse of effectiveness measures are noted, as well as opposing views of the movement as a very positive trend. Three major types of assessment programs are described: (1) those focusing on program improvement; (2) those ensuring that all graduates possess basic academic competencies; and (3) those intended to assist in budget decisions and accountability. Next, the COEP is explained. After providing background information, the paper enumerates COEP's major intended provisions, including a common statewide assessment of general intellectual skills; institutional assessment of general education outcomes; faculty assessment of students' learning; and an assessment of students' personal development and satisfaction. Final sections summarize interviews with three COEP administrators concerning funding, barriers to COEP implementation, perceived benefits, and the use of results; and with three community college COEP directors, regarding the value of COEP, and their concerns about funding, the use of outcomes, and the extent of state involvement. (ALB)

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THE WHY AND HOW OF MANDATED ASSESSMENT IN NEW JERSEY

Institutional assessment has become an increasingly familiar term to officials of higher education in the last few years. Today, more than ever before, educators are being called upon to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their institutions, particularly in the areas of student learning and goal attainment. A concern for the quality of education has created a need for more extensive assessment of student outcomes.

The term "assessment" refers to the various procedures that are used to determine the extent to which individual students have met the curricular goals, mastered the prescribed subject matter, and acquired the skills and characteristics that certify them as having the essential marks of an educated person. In higher education assessment is the measurement of how students have been positively affected by their college experience. This paper will discuss three aspects of assessment: The historical development of postsecondary assessment; the mandated program for assessment that has been initiated in the state of New Jersey; and the response of the state's community colleges to that mandate.

Emergence of Assessment Movement

Originally, assessment programs in higher education

were the domain of the individual institutions. Colleges and universities were responsible for their own assessment measures and outcomes. But in recent years, political and educational leaders began asking more hard questions about the quality of higher education. The subject of assessment came to the forefront in the mid-80s when several major national reports on the quality of undergraduate education were critical of student outcomes. Great concern was expressed for the lack of quality and content that was apparent among the students graduating across the country.

The first report in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education shocked the nation with its condemning report entitled A Nation at Risk. The paper questioned the standards being used by American high schools, stating a grave concern for mediocrity that threatens the future of the nation. Within a short time, the focus shifted to higher education. In 1984, the National Institute of Education issued Involvement in Learning, which called for increasing emphasis on undergraduate teaching and learning, and for institutions to be more accountable for expectations and standards and for assessing the degree to which those ends were being met.

Also in 1984, then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett released a report To Reclaim a Legacy in which a concern was expressed that students lack "cultural literacy" due to the growth of professional studies at the expense of the humanities. Bennett believed that too many faculty were

research specialists and that narrow specializations led to a vacuum of responsibility for the curriculum as a whole. He strongly urged that knowledge be at the core of the curriculum, and that assessment focus on determining whether college students have the required knowledge before they graduate. This report was followed by Integrity in the College Curriculum in 1985, a report released by the Association of American Colleges which also cited a decay in the college course of study.

These "statements" regarding the quality, or lack of quality, of education within the nation's institutions of higher learning sounded the bell of alarm, followed by a call for action. At the state level, a number of responses surfaced. In 1986, the Education Commission of States released a report entitled Transforming the State Role in Undergraduate Education. The Commission noted that excellence in undergraduate education was necessary in order that we remain strong and competitive as a nation. Not only were the colleges and institutions responsible for quality education, but also for assessing that education and the quality of student and faculty involvement in the educational process. The Commission recommended a stronger state role in higher education in order to meet these challenges.

One of the state governors most concerned about undergraduate assessment and reform is Governor Thomas H. Kean of our own state of New Jersey. He chaired the States' Commission which released the above report, and has been a

strong advocate for improved undergraduate education throughout the state and nation. In an article to educational leaders in Change magazine Governor Kean wrote,

> If you serve anywhere in higher education, you have promised that your graduates will be fit members of a free republic, able to carry the full burden of public life....that they will have the knowledge and abilities to be productive in their work - a prerequisite not only of national strength but individual fulfillment.....What we want, both those of us in higher education and those in public office, is stronger undergraduate education. The point of an assessment system is to help us along that path....Educators have to help design assessment systems that meet their own highest standards, that ask and answer real questions....(Change, 1988).

Opposition to Assessment

The greatest pressure for assessment is directed towards the public institutions. The assessment movement grew out of the concern for the number of dollars being spent on education and the return on those dollars. Private industry, prospective students and their families, faculty and administrators, and state officials joined the various task forces created to examine the status of higher education and began to demand evidence that the large and growing amount of public money being spent on higher education was producing what it intended.

As a result of these concerns, more and more states since 1985 have mandated assessment, requiring colleges and universities to identify programs for collecting this kind of information. Obviously, there has been resistance to the movement. Some educators fear imposition of rigid, politically expedient requirements, such as standardized tests with results determining faculty salaries or college

budgets. Many faculty members see assessment as a new set of demands being imposed upon them from without - from governors, legislators, accrediting associations, and from the administrations at their own institutions. They see it as a threat to their freedom to run their courses as they see fit and with no outside interference. Others see precious state funds being used for programs with questionable returns. Also, a significant number of educators have expressed concerns about the misuse of affectiveness measures by external agencies.

Support for Assessment

In spite of these concerns, the assessment movement has gone forward. In at least 40 states some type of assessment program has been required by law or policy. A report in Campus Trends shows that in 1988 43% of all public institutions, compared to 35% in 1987, report they are under a state mandate to conduct assessment (Trends, 1988).

James Daughdrill, Jr. in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education sees the movement as very positive. He believes that assessment, even in its infancy, is already "...doing more for education, for institutions, and for faculty members than any other development in recent history (Chronicle, 1988)." When successfully accomplished, institutional assessment will: 1) Bring the focus back to higher education where it should be - on education, teaching and learning; 2) Re-emphasize the critical role of faculty and good teaching - what comes out of college experiences,

not what goes in; and 3) Serve to define and differentiate institutions (Daughdrill, Jr., 1988).

There are differences in the kinds of programs being developed based upon the intended primary use of the outcomes data; but despite subtle differences, three major categories or typologies have emerged (Bray & Belcher, 1987). In each model, data is used for a different purpose: 1) For program improvement, to provide information to individual students so that they can guage their academic progress. Students can be tested as incoming students and again as they are exiting. This provides a measure of the educational gains from their college years, the "value-added" approach to assessment. Exit tests also provide normative information, so that graduates of a program can be compared to graduates from other, similar institutions. A program-improvement emphasis also requires active use by faculty and administrators of the information collected to effect change in meeting the mission and goals of their institutions; 2) A gateway model, with the purpose of ensuring basic academic competencies in all graduates. In Florida's version every sophomore in the state must pass a competency examination before advancing to junior status. Much of the criticism of outcomes assessment is directed at programs based on gatekeeping functions. One unintended negative consequence of Florida's test has been a significant reduction in the number of Spanish-speaking students eligible to continue as college juniors; and 3) To assist in budget decisions and

accountability, to determine whether taxpayers and parents are "getting their money's worth." Colleges and universities are concerned about these kinds of pressures, but the information generated can also be used for improving curricular offerings and student services. In Tennesee, for example, measures of improved student outcomes are used to help institutions qualify for incentive funding, including up to 5 percent of additional funds by demonstrating academic achievement in general education and in majors. One must conclude in looking at these 3 models that most outcomes' programs represent some blend of the three. In the long run, assessment programs must be understood and evaluated on an individual basis as they meet local and state needs.

New Jersey's Response to Assessment

New Jersey, like many other states, has responded to the call for more extensive measures of student outcomes. In 1985, in answer to the latest mandate by the New Jersey State Board of Higher Education, a College Outcomes Evaluation Program (COEP) was created. It was developed to provide feedback on how higher education is performing in the state and as a catalyst for improvement. The Board resolution called for the creation of a comprehensive statewide assessment program. While much focus was placed on the development of a sophomore test in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning and verbal skills, the Board also sought assessment of other areas of student learning, as well as the outcomes of faculty research and the impact of the

institutions on society.

An Advisory Committee was appointed to make recommendations to the Board on how best to implement such an assessment program. This group determined that assessment serves the dual purposes of accountability and institutional diagnosis, rejecting the gateway model. Also, it was aware that in spite of the need for a statewide assessment program, any effort had to take into account that each individual college has its own unique history, mission, faculty, student body, and relevant public. Because of sensitivity to institutional uniqueness, on the one hand, and awareness of an appropriate state role, on the other, COEP determined that the emphasis of a state effort should be to encourage and aid institutions to carry out their own programs for assessment and improvement.

The Advisory Committee recommended that multiple outcomes measures be identified for potential study, and that multiple methods of data collection and analysis be available for use. A truly comprehensive assessment program must rely on a variety of methods (e.g. survey, interview, and direct observation) to yield both qualitative and quantitative information (COEP Report, 1987).

After two years of meetings and many discussions with educators and leaders throughout the state, COEP's Advisory Committee made 8 recommendations for a comprehensive state assessment program:

1. A common statewide assessment of general

intellectual skills should be developed for use by each institution.

2. Each institution should assess the specific outcomes of its general education program.

3. Faculty in each program, department, or discipline should assess students' learning in each major course of study prior to graduation.

4. Student development should be assessed at each institution using common statewide definitions for a number of indicators, including retention rates, program completion rates, grade point averages, credit completion ratios, licensure/certification exam results, and post-collegiate information.

5. Each institution should assess both the personal development of its students and the degree of their satisfaction/involvement with their institutions.

6. Each institution should assess the outcomes of its efforts in the areas of research, scholarship, and creative expression.

7. Using common statewide definitions, each institution should assess its success in providing access and meeting the human resource needs of its population, as well as appraising its economic impact on the community.

8. Based upon its mission and goals, each institution should assess its particular impacts on the community it serves.

The Advisory Committee recommended that the Department of Higher Education should provide the funding to carry out these recommendations, and should provide appropriate guidelines and technical assistance to the institutions in order that they may implement the recommendations and establish broad-based assessment efforts.

The State's Response to COEP

In order to evaluate the merits of COEP and better understand its mission, I interviewed several COEP officials:

Dr. Edward Morante, Director of COEP for the State Board of Higher Education; Dr. Wade Curry, Program Specialist for COEP; and Dr. Arnold Gelfman, Chairperson of the General Intellectual Skills Committee. They were asked to discuss the scope of COEP's program, including its purpose, funding, benefits, problems, and use of results. Following is a summary of their comments.

Funds - Funding for COEP is uneven among the institutions. A total of $850,000 was included in the state budget for the program this year, plus funds through the Governor's Challenge Grants. The public four-year institutions received varying amounts of money, with Rutgers receiving $400,000 and a number of state colleges $100,000 each. The commnity colleges did not receive any funds; and the private colleges were urged to participate, but had to provide their own resources. The state knows that it will have to continue to support COEP in dollars as well as concept, and that there should be more equitable funding.

Criticisms - The officials interviewed believe the biggest hurtle in getting COEP into operation is fear of change, which is expressed as a number of concerns: 1) Autonomy on the local campuses - that it is a directive coming down from the state which will impinge upon the domain of individual colleges, and which will require extra money and work load for benefits that are viewed as questionable; 2) That authorities will not be mission-sensitive when analyzing results. It is difficult to make comparisons when

individual institutions are so different in their focus, populations, programs; and 3) The concern about accurate outcomes - how to obtain reliable data for the evaluation of intellectual skills, mastery of subject matter in majors, general education, student development, and others.

Benefits - The state sees the benefits of COEP as far outweighing the critcisms. The officials I interviewed spoke very positively of COEP. They see the results being used mainly by the individual institutions as they look at their own programs, students, faculty, and communities. There will be a need for accountability, and the state hopes resultant action will come from the colleges themselves, that they will want to improve their programs should deficiencies exist. It will be important that the colleges develop their own models for change. These, then, in turn can be shared by others.

Types of Assessment - When asked which of the assessments would be the most valuable on the state level, the answer was unanimous, the General Intellectual Skills Test (GIS). This is the one measure that will be obtained throughout the state in all the public institutions. It will provide a base line for a comparison of student intellectual skills from school to school. This is a test that is presently being developed for the state by Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton. It will attempt to measure a student's ability to use critical thinking skills in completing a task of an academic nature. Reading, writing, quantitative and analytical skills will be required

in completing the tasks. For assessment purposes, no scores will be identified for individual students, but rather there will be composite scores for the institutions. Both Dr. Morante and Dr. Curry are quite enthusiastic about the GIS test. It has been difficult to develop, since it is so innovative, but they see its results as providing an opportunity for the faculty and administration of the colleges to take a look at what and how they teach, and then to consider action for improving the intellectual and educational processes where appropriate.

It is believed that the most difficult assessment will be quantifying faculty efforts in the areas of research, scholarship and creative expession. The state recognizes that richness in these areas is important for good learning to take place, but it will be difficult to identify and develop measures. So far, the colleges are doing very little in this area because of these problems.

Monitoring COEP - The State Board of Higher Education has a staff to assist the individual COEP programs. A part of this structure is a Liason Committee consisting of representatives from all the campuses, including both public and private schools. This group meets regularly during the year, with Dr. Morante as chairperson. Colleges are kept abreast of what is happening and what is expected to be accomplished. In addition, there is a state committee for each of the 5 areas of assessment. A schedule of events and deadlines has been outlined for the next 13 years. The state

officials hope that committee members will feel they have an opportunity for input, that they are part of the planning and decision-making process. The first COEP results will not become available until 1991. Actual assessment or gathering of data will take place only after the goals and means have been clearly defined. The goals and objectives of the assessment areas are being identified this year, and next year the methods of data collection will be determined.

Use of Results - Once the results become available, the state will aid the local campuses in analyzing and presenting the data. One of the analysis "tools" will be the use of independent consultants coming from outside the state who will be engaged to help evaluate both the goals and outcomes. The state wants to dispel a "big daddy" image in doing the evaluation itself; and it also recognizes that it would be difficult for the individual institutions to analyze their own data.

When the results are available, they will be presented first to the local campuses and to the State Board of Higher Education. Obviously, the results will be shared eventually with the governor and state legislators. The use of the results should serve two purposes: 1) To encourage the colleges to make improvements in their programs; and 2) To assure the public (legislators, governor, voters) that the state's system of higher education is, indeed, effective. Both Morante and Curry emphasize that the focus for COEP and its outcomes will be at the local level. The state's role is

to assist in the implementation of the program, but the real value lies with the individual institutions and their students. The responses so far have been uneven. 50% of the colleges are very involved, with others not taking as much initiative as they should. The state officials hope that in time the value of COEP will become more apparent so that there will be fuller participation.

The Community College's Response to COEP

The above comments present the state's involvement in COEP. But to fully understand COEP's mission, it is necessary to know what the response of the local institutions has been. I interviewed COEP directors in several community colleges in order to ascertain how the two-year colleges view the program, and to learn to what degree the individual institutions have become involved. Two of the three colleges interviewed have been very supportive. They are community colleges with large enrollments and a progressive educational philosophy. The third one, smaller and more traditional, has had minimal participation so far.

Value of COEP - All three colleges recognize the value of institutional assessment. They see it as a tool that can be used to look at teaching and learning, to determine if the college's goals and objectives are being met. As one director said, "It can be a catalyst for change." The two larger schools see the state program as comprehensive and ambitious. They accept the state's role in initiating the program, and are actively participating in it. They have

developed COEP programs on their own campuses, and have representatives serving on state committees. Even in this first year they see that COEP can be a positive force. In several instances, changes have been initiated based upon observations made by their working committees.

The third college which I interviewed is less positive about COEP. There is opposition to a state-mandated program. The institution believes strongly in local control and resents the directive for participation coming down from the state. The school's involvement to date has been limited. The local director has served on a state committee, but there has been little effort to meet COEP's schedule on its campus. With two months left until the first COEP deadline in June, the academic officer at the college has sent out just recently a memorandum calling for volunteers among the faculty to serve on COEP committees for determining goals and objectives for general education and selected majors. It is very unlikely they will be able to complete their task in time.

All three colleges recognize that the two areas of assessment which will be most helpful to them will be general education and the majors, since these are most directly related to student learning. They believe that it will be possible to obtain measures for the majors, but more difficult to get accurate indicators of a "generally educated" student. They are sceptical about the merits of the GIS test. They believe it will be interesting data

to obtain, but they wonder what the results will show about the education of their students; and how the data can be used to affect change within their institutions. They agree with the state officials that the area of assessment most difficult to accomplish will be faculty research, scholarship and creative expession.

Concerns - The greatest concern to the three colleges is funding for COEP. Last year $850,000 was identified for assessment among the four-year institutions, but none of the community colleges received financial assistance. The community colleges are very sensitive about this. Governor Kean vetoed one million dollars that the legislature had allocated for them. (The community college presidents had requested general funds, rather than funds earmarked for special programs, including COEP. This was unacceptable to the Governor, so he red-lined their allocation.) The community colleges do not feel that the state officials, including the governor, are sensitive enough to their fiscal needs. If participation in COEP is mandated, then funds should be made equally available to all the public institutions.

It is interesting to note that although the two larger schools agree that extra funds are needed for COEP, they have managed to put their programs into operation by drawing from other sources. (In fact, according to Dr. Morante a larger percentage of community colleges have complied with COEP than have the four-year schools.) The third college feels very

strongly that it will not be able to comply with the state mandate if funds are not provided; it is not as able to absorb the costs as some of the larger schools. This is a major point of contention for them.

There were two other important concerns expressed during the interviews. The community colleges are concerned about how the outcomes will be used. They fear that comparisons will be made between them, which will be misleading since their populations and missions are so different, or that comparisons will be made between them and the four-year institutions. They wonder who will have access to the data, and how it will be interpreted - especially by non-educators. Also, the extent of the state's involvement was questioned. Despite the fact that COEP is a state program, the colleges prefer a minimum of state control. They agree with the Advisory Committee's recommendation that assessment be locally planned and executed. Some concern was expressed that in spite of this recommendation, the state will continue to become more involved, especially once the results are available and it becomes obvious that program changes need to be made. Those interviewed predict that the state office for COEP will grow larger as time goes on, and will exert more power. One example of this concern is the fact that the State Board of Higher Education has requested a 23% budget increase for the office next year, a sizeable increase at the same time that the community colleges continue to lack funds.

Conclusions

Assessment of student outcomes and efforts for improvement of academic programs are viewed as very positive movements today. New Jersey is to be commended for developing a major program to meet these demands. However, as has been noted, there are some concerns about this assessment program. COEP is a very comprehensive project. Its mission is extremely ambitious. Obtaining the desired outcomes will involve many individuals and populations over an extended number of years. As time goes on, the tasks will become more complex. This year's schedule for determining goals and objectives for the various areas of assessment is just the tip of the iceberg. Identifying and employing appropriate means for measurement, plus providing fair evaluations and interpretations of data, will be a major undertaking, requiring extensive funds and manpower.

Under consideration here has been the response of the state's community colleges. Although only three schools were interviewed for this paper, their views reflect many of the concerns expressed by their fellow institutions, and by educators nationwide as noted earlier in the paper. In general, the community colleges believe assessment of student outcomes is necessary, although support of the state-mandated program varies between schools. Those interviewed recognize that some problems exist for COEP, including funding, use of data, and the relationship between the local and state offices. Some of their views differ from those of the state

officials, including the value of the GIS test, distribution of funds, and the role of the state office. Also, during the interviews I perceived a fourth problem which was discussed only briefly because it will not become pressing until next year - data collection. A critical issue will be the kinds of measures that will be employed to obtain the necessary outcomes. If assessment is to be carried out at the local level, with only the general intellectual skills test conducted statewide, there will be a wide variation in the measures used and the presentation of their results. This raises some concerns for their interpretation (especially if outside consultants are used), and how they will be used to bring about change.

More issues could be raised here, but the intent of this paper has been to develop a general understanding of the assessment movement in higher education, and to present an overview of the state's initiative through COEP. Also, an effort has been made to learn something of the community colleges' response to the program. The mission of COEP has merit and its results can be worthwhile; but state and local officials will have to be dedicated to working cooperatively over an extended number of years towards the fulfillment of its recommendations. A key factor will be the source of funding for the program. At a time when funds are scarce for even basic educational needs, one must wonder where monies and manpower will come from to fully promote and support COEP. This will be no easy task, but certainly one that is

important to pursue if our ultimate goal is to provide quality education for the students of this state.

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